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Viewers set for a dream October baseball playoffs

By Bob Nightengale, USA TODAY

Fox Sports President Ed Goren woke up Monday morning, turned on the TV to check out the stock market and couldn't believe what he was hearing.

He tuned to CNBC, but instead of listening to analysts discuss stocks, bonds and the futures market, anchor Mark Haines was moaning about the New York Mets' collapse. Then he was talking to a CEO in Illinois gushing about the Chicago Cubs.

Who wants to talk stocks when you can address the New York Yankees' postseason rotation? "It's amazing," Goren says. "All anyone's doing is talking baseball. Oh, and by the way, the market is at an all-time high. It's wonderful."

Major League Baseball, which drew a record 79.5 million fans this year with perhaps its most dramatic regular-season weekend since the advent of the wild card, is poised to conquer the world. The postseason tournament starts Wednesday with three best-of-five Division Series; a fourth Division Series, pitting the Yankees and Cleveland Indians, is scheduled to open Thursday.

"This sport," Commissioner Bud Selig says, "is the most popular it's ever been. It has been our national pastime. It still is our national pastime. It always will be our national pastime."

Especially with this postseason's contenders, who have a chance to dominate the headlines, talk shows and, most important, TV ratings, for all of October.

"I could never have imagined this type of momentum going into the postseason," says Turner Sports President David Levy, whose TBS cable network showed the Colorado Rockies' dramatic win against the San Diego Padres on Monday to make the postseason and will carry all first-round games and the National League Championship Series. "This postseason, with the teams involved we have, is an absolute dream for a network."

For the first time, baseball will have five of the top seven markets represented in the playoffs. They also have the Yankees, Philadelphia Phillies and Boston Red Sox representing the East, the Cubs and Indians in the Midwest and the Rockies, Los Angeles Angels and Arizona Diamondbacks for the West.

"This is such a baseball marketing dream, it's almost like it was fixed. It's unreal," Minnesota center fielder Torii Hunter says,

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laughing. "Can you imagine the TV ratings? It's going to be crazy. You're talking about Cub fans all over the country. You got America's team, the Yankees. You got the Red Sox Nation. You got the underdogs like Cleveland.

"I can't wait to sit back on my couch and watch it. I want to see good commercials, too, like the Super Bowl. Don't give me any punk commercials. Show me the kind that has everyone talking like the Super Bowl ones."

Entwined in the culture

MLB actually has been creating its version of YouTube, named "actober," with fans and stars, such as James Caan and *Survivor* host Jeff Probst re-enacting dramatic postseason moments in their yards. Caan reminisced about his favorite Yankee moments. Probst impersonated Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter and former major leaguers Bobby Thomson and Kirk Gibson in a video.

"Our fans tell us that baseball has a greater cultural historical significance than any other sport," says Tim Brosnan, MLB executive vice president of business. "If you take a momentous event in life, whether marriage, the birth of your child, your first job, and relate it to a sports event, nine out of 10 people will give you a baseball game.

"The 2001 postseason is my favorite of all time because everybody who lives in New York had friends, relatives or a neighbor that was impacted by 9/11. I really believe that baseball and the postseason played a pretty strong role in helping what was a difficult recovery. That will always be special to me."

This time, instead of helping a nation recover, the postseason could mend plenty of broken hearts. The Cubs have not won the World Series in 99 years. The Indians last won in 1948. The Phillies, who had the sixth-longest playoff drought in baseball, haven't won a World Series in 27 years. The Rockies have never made it to a World Series.

And if you talk to Yankees fans, seven years seems like an eternity.

"We're the underdog," Cubs president John McDonough says. "Come on, it's been 99 years. We lost 96 games last year. How can you be a bigger underdog than that?"

Are the Cubs really baseball's Cinderella team?

"Nah," Goren says. "There's one good reason. (Cubs manager Lou) Piniella doesn't look good in glass slippers."

The Cubs, America's lovable losers, figure to hog the spotlight as long as they're in the postseason.

Everyone once again will hear about the curse of the billy goat.

The black cat that darted in front of their dugout in 1969.

And, yes, news organizations will try to track down Steve Bartman, the fan who interfered with that foul ball in Game 6 of the NLCS, perhaps costing the Cubs a shot at the World Series.

"I don't want to sound presumptuous and say what's good for the Cubs is good for baseball," says McDonough, who has spent 24 years in the organization, "but from a TV ratings standpoint, it's seismic. The Cubs are a significant attraction. Everyone, it seems, can relate to us.

"We've had the same logo for 80 years. Played in the same ballpark for 93 years. We've been on the same TV station for 60 years. The same radio station for 70 years. People have become accustomed to these things. And because of the ticking tock syndrome, we've always been the underdog."

Levy says the inclusion of the Cubs could make this a cherished postseason with sky-high ratings. For the regular season, viewership was up 25% on ESPN and 13% on ESPN2. It was down 4% on Fox, but 20 of the 29 U.S. markets with baseball teams showed a local ratings increase, according to MLB research.

"I knew before the year started that baseball is in an up-cycle," Levy says, "but what we're seeing now is people excited about the postseason before it even happens. This couldn't have worked out any better."

Wild finish

As late as last Thursday, eight NL teams were vying for four spots, with the possibility of a five-way tie. There could have been a four-way tie involving two divisional titles and a wild card as late as Sunday. The Phillies didn't know until Monday night they were playing the Rockies.

No wonder Selig got excited last weekend listening to Phillies president David Montgomery fondly recall the 1994 day they announced the addition of a wild-card entrant in each league.

"Commissioner, when we decided to go with all of this, did you ever believe it could be this good? Did you ever?" Montgomery asked Selig.

"We have numbers today that nobody could ever have thought about, including me," Selig says. "Our attendance. Our local TV ratings. Our national ratings. The amount of interest is legendary. This business is hitting on all cylinders."

"Just to see what happened in New York, what happened in Philadelphia, in Colorado and San Diego, is just fascinating. If somebody wrote this plot, nobody would have believed it."

Who would have imagined just three months ago that the Yankees and Cubs would be in the playoffs, and the Mets and Milwaukee Brewers would be sitting home? Or that the Diamondbacks, without Randy Johnson, would win the NL West? Or that the Phillies would overcome a seven-game deficit 2½ weeks ago to win the NL East?

"This last week has been as exciting as any I've seen in sports," says Jeff Moorad, Diamondbacks chief executive officer. "Now we have tremendous excitement and build-up towards the postseason. The fact that markets across the country — big and small — are represented in the postseason is a testimony to the commissioner's grand plan."

Perfect balance

Certainly, baseball's competitive balance might be reflected in the division series, where there is no heavy favorite or huge underdog.

"What's really intriguing is not only with the markets involved," HBO host Bob Costas says, "but that all of the teams in the American League are good enough to get to the World Series and none of the National League's are so good that none have a chance."

"I can't see any series where there is a prohibitive favorite until the World Series, where the American League would be favored because it is clearly superior to the National League."

Yet, the Yankees and Cubs have defied the odds by simply making it to the postseason. Both, thought to be out of it in June, resurrected into contenders.

"They went through the same kind of hell to get here," Goren says. "The two veteran managers (Piniella and the Yankees' Joe Torre) held up stoically while everyone around them was panicking. Now after a brutal year, they're in the playoffs. In typical Cubs fashion, it was perfect."

Although the perfect culmination of this baseball season might be a World Series between these teams, Goren says the ultimate drama would be a showdown between the Cubs and Red Sox.

"Now that the Red Sox have won," Goren says, "the Cubs are the missing piece."

"We're in the middle of football (on Sunday), and someone says, 'Wouldn't it be great to see the Red Sox and Cubs in the World Series?' I turned around and said, 'If that happened, what would I have left in life?' I would have to retire. You want that

at some point, but do you want all of that now?

"And then," Goren says, "there are some sick people that can see the Red Sox and Cubs go down to the ninth inning of Game 7, something goes wrong, and the World Series is canceled.

"Could you imagine?"

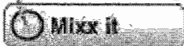
Fans are everywhere

Many of baseball's playoff participants enjoy fervent support at home and on the road:

Team	Home attendance	MLB rank	Road attendance	MLB rank
New York Yankees	4,271,083	1	2,978,202	2
Boston Red Sox	2,970,755	11	3,130,043	1
Los Angeles Angels	3,365,632	5	2,527,958	23
Cleveland Indians	2,275,912	22	2,384,283	26
Chicago Cubs	3,252,462	6	2,920,333	3
Philadelphia Phillies	3,108,325	8	2,659,772	14
Arizona Diamondbacks	2,325,233	20	2,785,413	7
Colorado Rockies	2,327,846	19	2,733,985	10

Source: Major League Baseball

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NHL's Strong Comeback Marred by Poor TV Ratings

By Tarik El-Bashir and Thomas Heath
Washington Post Staff Writers
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NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman stood before a sea of cameras in New York last July and promised the league would emerge from its canceled 2004-05 season with more excitement and an economic system that would give all 30 teams a shot at profitability.

As the Stanley Cup finals begin tonight, Bettman appears to have achieved most of his goals: scoring and attendance are up and revenues are healthy, rule changes have made the game faster and more thrilling, and any team -- even those from small markets -- can win, as the finals between the Carolina Hurricanes and Edmonton Oilers proves.

The big exception is television ratings -- a key revenue driver and measure of a sport's mass appeal -- which have gone from bad to worse. The NHL playoffs, mostly relegated to the Outdoor Life Network (OLN), a second-tier cable channel known for hunting and fishing programs and its Tour de France coverage, have barely registered with the American public. NBC's ratings aren't great, either.

"You look at the playoff [ratings] numbers, and they have been beaten pretty soundly by poker and bowling," said Paul Swangard, managing director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon. "But I don't think this year was ever about robust TV numbers. It was about the gate and about competitive balance. With an economic model that doesn't rely on television, they can make this league work long-term."

Bettman said the league continues to aspire to a national television audience, despite years of evidence that shows the NHL is a regional sport whose economics are attendance-driven. Bettman attaches his aspirations to those of OLN, which has jumped from 65 million to 70 million subscribers since it began broadcasting the NHL this season.

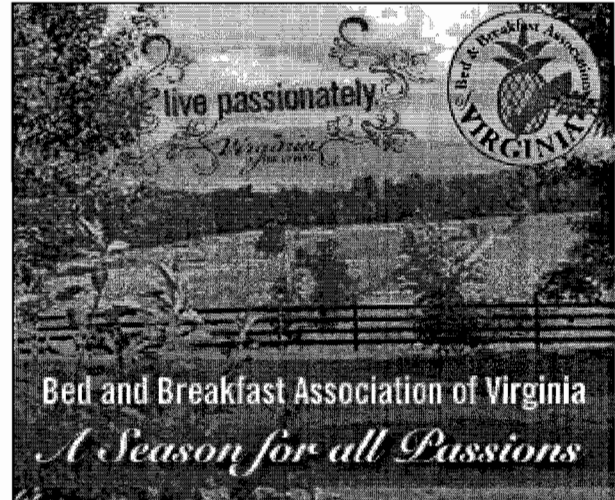
"In the short term, we gave up some TV subscribers," Bettman said in a telephone interview, referring to the league's move from the high-visibility of ESPN to the lesser-known OLN. "And in return, with patience, we will have better coverage, better production. And over time, both we and OLN will grow our presence."

He said OLN's coverage, involving six hours of hockey each night, will help bring back old fans and introduce the game to potential new ones. The coverage includes feature stories, hockey-themed movies, as well as highlight and wrap-up shows. Next season, the Comcast-owned OLN will switch its name to Versus as it expands its sports programming, using the NHL as its centerpiece.

"That is the type of treatment we have always coveted," Bettman said.

The NHL parted ways with ESPN when the network declined to offer the NHL any type of upfront

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rights fees for airing its games. Instead, ESPN proposed splitting profits after the network recouped its costs, terms virtually unheard of among the major professional sports leagues.

The NFL earns nearly \$4 billion each year in national television rights fees, which earns each team well in excess of \$100 million a year. And Major League Baseball and the NBA earn more than \$700 million a year from national television rights, of which teams receive more than \$20 million apiece. By contrast, the NHL national rights fee contract with OLN amounts to about \$2 million per team.

Measured another way, the NHL will earn about 3 percent of its revenue from national television this year. The NBA's and MLB's share of national television revenue is well into the double digits, and the NFL's television revenue is about 66 percent of the total league-wide earnings.

Faced with little television revenue and rising costs, Bettman forced a player lockout last year and canceled the season rather than continuing to incur losses he said totaled nearly \$500 million from 2002 through 2004.

But this season, thanks to higher than expected revenues and a new collective bargaining agreement with the NHL players' association that caps the amount the league pays its players at 54 percent of earnings, the NHL expects most of its teams will be profitable.

The salary cap has also created more parity on the ice, because the big media market teams like New York, Chicago, Detroit and Toronto can't beat the small-market clubs by simply outspending them. As a result, teams that lack the appeal the big clubs generate, like Edmonton and Carolina, are in the finals -- and television exposure continues to suffer.

During the playoffs, OLN is averaging 0.4 rating, which is well below the 0.7 ESPN had at the same time in 2004. NBC's telecasts have averaged a 1.1 rating, off from the 1.5 ABC pulled two years ago. There's a sliver of good television news: the Eastern Conference finals between Carolina and Buffalo last week was one of the most watched OLN programs ever. But that's a far cry from the big national television presence that Bettman and NHL owners hoped to achieve when they expanded in the 1990s.

Television ratings in Canada, where hockey has a huge following, figure to be strong for the finals, especially because Edmonton is playing for its first championship since 1990. But ratings in the U.S. could be among the lowest ever sans a large market team. Raleigh-Durham, where college basketball is king and where the Hurricanes are located, is the 29th-largest media market in the nation.

"The two objectives of parity and creating a national television contract are not necessarily consistent with each other," said Jeff Citron, a Toronto-based attorney who once worked for the players' union. Then again, said Citron, "hockey, in all fairness, is just not a sport with national appeal to Americans."

Some experts say modern professional sports, which have moved away from dynasties and more toward a system of financial parity that give even the smallest team a shot at winning championships, has caused ratings to suffer across the board. Most league executives privately pray for major market teams to make it to their finals.

"You want the larger market teams to be in there," said Capitals owner Ted Leonsis. "It's not New York and L.A."

However, the NHL has rebounded better than expected from the longest labor dispute in professional sports history. Fans returned in force -- according to league figures, attendance was up 2.4 percent to

16,955 fans per game during the regular season, a record. Revenues will likely exceed \$2.1 billion, some \$300 million more than projected.

And the new rules helped scoring rise to an average of 6.17 goals per game, up from 5.14 the previous season.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether the improved on-ice product will ever translate into better ratings. Some supporters say the NHL may have to consign itself to being a gate-driven sport with little widespread appeal.

"The NHL is what it is," said television consultant Mike Trager. "It's a major sport that is ratings-challenged."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

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